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# ¶ An Epoch-Making Picture: Nocturne in Black and Gold---The Falling Rocket. ❀



## I



AMONG the pictures in the Whistler exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is an upright panel, not quite two feet in height and lacking a trifle less than a foot and a half in width. Yet how little has size to do with art! For this comparatively small painting is an epoch-making picture. There it hangs, its middle ground a swirl of smoke and glare; dots of light in the background sufficiently indicating by suggestion the outlines of a turret and the facade of a building; and floating in air or precipitously falling and luminous against the black smoke or the deep blue of night, seen where the sombre veil is rent in twain, the colored globules and showering sparks of fireworks.

## THE LOTUS

That any one who could appreciate the "Fighting Temeraire" should have failed to discover the beauty, the significance to art in this picture's refutation of academic formula, seems incredible. Yet this is the "Nocturne in Black and Gold—The Falling Rocket," the picture which Ruskin, who had "made" Turner, singled out for an attack, so vituperative that it led to the libel suit of Whistler vs. Ruskin, than which no action at law involving a painting is more famous. Time is a slow avenger, but a remorseless one. The first effect of Ruskin's onslaught was to decrease the sales, none too large, of Whistler's pictures. But in the end it was the critic's undoing. It was too vituperative to be forgotten. The sense of its injustice grew with Whistler's increasing fame and it is not too much to say that the attack on "The Falling Rocket" eventually led to the decline of Ruskin's authority as an art critic, at the same time redounding, through the sense of injury and injustice with which it was recalled, to Whistler's advantage. ¶ For this reason I call "The Falling Rocket" epoch-making. It marks the decline of an arrogant school of criticism and the beginning of Whistler's influence

on modern art, an influence so subtle that the artists themselves hardly are aware of it. And note, in passing, that whoever holds a brief for Whistler against Ruskin holds briefs for Velasquez and Rembrandt, whom also he utterly failed to appreciate. And think of the rank among old masters these artists hold today!



Because of the importance that thus attaches to the picture—which belongs to the collection of Mrs. Samuel Untermyer and is lent by her to the exhibition—it has seemed to me well worth while to assemble here as many facts in the history of this painting as can be gathered into the limits of a magazine article.

Let me first say, however, that up to March 30, the tablet under the picture in the Metropolitan exhibition gave the title incorrectly as “Nocturne in Blue and Gold—The Falling Rocket.” As I could not imagine why the title of a picture that had figured so conspicuously in the artist’s career, should be changed, I made inquiry, with the result that the error was corrected.

It was Frederick R. Leyland, whose portrait

**THE** by Whistler, lent by Col. Freer, is in the Metropolitan  
**LOTUS** exhibition, who suggested "Nocturne" to the artist as a suitable title for some of his pictures. "I can't thank you too much," Whistler wrote to Leyland, "for the name 'Nocturne' as the title for my moonlights. You have no idea what an irritation it proves to the critics and consequent pleasure to me; besides it really is so charming and does so poetically say all I want to say and no more than I wish."



## II

### ¶ In the Grosvenor Gallery. ❁

**T**HE Dudley Gallery, one of the few galleries open to him for exhibition, appears to have been the first in which this picture was shown, the exhibition being held during October, 1875. Another nocturne, "in Blue and Gold, No. III," was exhibited with it. "The Falling Rocket," the Pennells in their "Life" speak of as "the impression of fireworks that filled the night with beauty for Whis-

tlar in the gardens of Cremorne." It made no impression, however, and the "Athenaeum" was quite alone in giving it some praise. The only wonder is that, in the then state of public taste in England it received any attention at all. Yet it was destined before long to become the subject of one of the most sensational trials at law in which a picture ever was involved—a trial so far reaching in its results that "Nocturne in Black and Gold—The Falling Rocket," deserves to be called an epoch-making canvas.



During May, 1877, Sir Coutts Lindsay opened the Grosvenor Gallery—the "greenery-yallery, Grosvenor Gallery" of Gilbert and Sullivan's "Patience." Whistler and the Pre-Raphaelites were the "greenery-yallery" element. But there also was a more commonplace side to the gallery exhibitions. For with the daring that led him to invite Whistler and the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, Sir Coutts Lindsay combined a caution that led him not to break with the Royal Academy. Watts, Millais, Alma-Tadema and Poynter also were among his elect. He gave dinners to those artists whose work he especially aspired to exhibit and one can sympathize with his butler who appeared to consider them a strange lot.

THE LOTUS It is recorded that on one occasion, this important functionary entered the drawing room and whispered to Sir Coutts, "There's a gent downstairs says he has come to dinner, wot's forgot his necktie and stuck a feather in his 'air." The "gent," of course, was Whistler who at that time discarded the necktie of evening attire and already wore the white lock, which others, including the attendant in Mrs. Leyland's opera box, mistook for a white feather that somehow or other had got caught in his hair.

To the first exhibition in the Grosvenor Gallery Whistler sent the "Nocturne in Black and Gold—The Falling Rocket," "Harmony in Amber and Black" (the first title of the "Fur Jacket") and Irving as Philip II of Spain, to which he gave the title, "Arrangement in Black, No. III." As the occasion marks history, let it be added that Mrs. Leyland sent "Nocturne in Blue and Silver," the Thames and Battersea viewed from the windows of Lindsey Row, while two "Nocturnes" came from others. The "Carlyle" also was in the show, but was received too late to be recorded in the catalogue. At the exhibition the "Bath" by Alma-Tadema, the "Days of

Creation" by Burne-Jones, the "Love and Death" by Watts, the "Afterglow" by Holman Hunt were the pictures that engaged the crowd. Even Sir Coutts Lindsay, at the private view, expressed disappointment over the "Nocturnes" and the "Irving."



If even the host of the gallery fell foul of the Whistlers, is it wonder the critics did? "Mr. Whistler's compartment musical with strange Nocturnes," was the way the "Times" put it; and the "Times" critic wondered how Irving enjoyed "being reduced to a mere arrangement." This comment at least had the merit of being amusing. Ruskin, however, went to an unpardonable length. He was then issuing the "Fors Clavigera," which the Pennells aptly call his "circulating pulpit." In the issue of July 2d, 1877, appeared a review of the Grosvenor Gallery exhibition in the course of which Ruskin wrote of the Whistler pictures as follows:—"For Mr. Whistler's own sake, no less than for the protection of the purchaser, Sir Coutts Lindsay ought not to have admitted works into the gallery in which the ill-educated conceit of the artist so nearly approaches the aspect of wilful imposture. I have seen and heard much of cockney impudence before now, but



THE  
LOTUS

never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face."



¶ Heretofore Whistler had ignored criticism, save to comment upon it sarcastically in private or, possibly, to reply through the medium of a newspaper letter. But Ruskin had gone too far. Not satisfied with criticizing the pictures, he had impugned not only the art, but also the motives—the honor—of the painter; and he further had impugned that honor by specifically stating that Whistler was asking two hundred guineas for “flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.” Two hundred guineas was the price asked for “The Falling Rocket,” and it was the only Whistler in the exhibition that was for sale, so that in every way it could be identified from the comment in “Fors Clavigera,” as the picture to which the last of the two sentences quoted from Ruskin was intended to apply.

According to Boughton when Whistler first saw this criticism, they were together in the smoking

room of the Arts Club. "The most debased STYLE of criticism I have had thrown at me yet," was Whistler's comment. "Sounds rather like libel," remarked Boughton. This may have been the first suggestion to Whistler that libel lurked in the criticism. If so, it struck him immediately, for he said, in reply to Boughton's remark, "Well—that I shall try to find out." He sued Ruskin for libel, the case coming up for trial in the Exchequer Chamber at Westminster, on November 2d, 1878.



¶ Whistler was in straitened, not to say, desperate circumstances. Ruskin's strictures may have strengthened the loyalty of the artist's friends, but it had made the sale of his pictures even more restricted than before. The interval between the Grosvenor exhibition and the trial was a gloomy one for him. Some help came to him from Charles Augustus Howell, a curious figure in the London art world; who, however, cannot be referred to here more than casually. Howell sold etchings for Whistler to Algernon Graves, the print dealer, and induced Graves to have a mezzotint of the "Carlyle" executed

THE by Josey; and the print was not unsuccessful.  
LOTUS Graves also commissioned Josey to engrave the  
"Mother" and the "Rosa Corder," which was done.  
Howell then deposited with Graves for the same  
purpose, three of the "Nocturnes," one of them being  
"The Falling Rocket." These, however, were not  
engraved, but the circumstance is mentioned because  
it involved "The Falling Rocket." Moreover, the  
fact that "The Falling Rocket" was selected as one of  
the six pictures by Whistler to be mezzotinted, shows  
that, in spite of the savage attacks made upon it,  
there were those ready to uphold its integrity as a  
work of art, however "queer" it might seem to critics  
and public.



### III

#### ¶The Trial at Westminster. ¶

One readily can appreciate the disadvantages under which Whistler labored as a plaintiff against Ruskin. The critic was wealthy and, having produced, with much labor, many volumes in a style of resounding eloquence that made him appear like a preacher on art, he was, to the English, a critic enthroned. An



attack upon him was an attack on a cherished institution and, when made by a Whistler, as preposterous as would have been a serious proposal to tear down the Tower and build a circus in its place. To the public Ruskin was a god, Whistler a mountebank. Yet the artist's motive was neither pique nor a craving for notoriety. The suit was instituted with the high and serious purpose to determine whether an honest artist has a right to paint what he wants to in his own way, though that way differ from the standard of patron, critic, academy or public. In the amusement which the incidents of the trial now evoke, Whistler's own meagre personal circumstances, the double odds against which he was obliged to fight, and his courage in entering into the controversy and remaining in it to the end, have been forgotten; and his integrity of purpose lost sight of.



¶ Into the details of the trial which took place November 25 and 26, 1878, in the Exchequer Chamber at Westminster, it is not necessary to go. "Mr. James Abbott McNeill Whistler, an artist, seeks to recover damages against Mr. John Ruskin, the well

THE . known author and art critic." Note that Whistler  
LOTUS was merely AN artist, while Ruskin figured as THE  
critic. Of counsel, the Attorney General, Sir John  
Holker, acting in his private capacity for Ruskin, was  
the most distinguished.

Whistler, when on the stand and asked for his definition of a Nocturne, replied : " I have, perhaps, meant rather to indicate an artistic interest alone in the work, divesting the picture from any outside sort of interest which might have been otherwise attached to it. It is an arrangement of line, form and color first, and I make use of any incident of it which shall bring about a symmetrical result. Among my works are some night pieces ; and I have chosen the word Nocturne because it generalizes and simplifies the whole set of them." Whistler once said of a "harmony" in which he had placed a single figure, that he had only to call it, "Father, dear Father, come home with me now," for it to become the "the picture of the year." For at that time art for art's sake was so little appreciated that it was the title and the "outside interest" attaching to pictures that sold them.

When "The Falling Rocket" was produced in evidence at the trial, it is said to have been shown upside down. Whistler described it as a night piece and representing the fireworks at Cremorne. One of his famous dicta was drawn out by his examination regarding this picture. Hostile counsel having asked how long he had taken to paint it, and he having replied that he was two days at work on it, the Attorney General said :

"The labor of two days then, is that for which you ask two hundred guineas?"

"No," replied Whistler; "I ask it for the knowledge of a lifetime."

Various pictures by Whistler were shown to the jury and sneeringly commented on by counsel for Ruskin. Then occurred one of the absurd incidents of the trial. Burne-Jones had testified, on the side of the defendant, to what he considered a want of finish, a lack of completeness in Whistler's pictures; that they, and in particular, "The Falling Rocket," failed to show the finish of complete works of art. In his opinion there was danger that "if unfinished pictures become common, we shall arrive at a stage



THE  
LOTUS

of mere manufacture and the art of the country will be degraded." Then, in order to show the jury what "Mr. Jones, R. A." (as Whistler called him) meant by a finished picture, a Titian belonging to Ruskin was exhibited to them, and they, thinking it was another picture by the plaintiff, one of them exclaimed, "Oh come, we have had enough of these Whistlers!"



¶ The jury was out an hour. They found for Whistler, but they awarded him only a farthing in damages and without costs, so that the costs of the trial, which were considerable, had to be divided between the parties to the suit. To Ruskin, who was wealthy, the costs signified little; to Whistler, who was poor, they meant bankruptcy. Notwithstanding Ruskin's wealth, the Fine Arts Society, as a tribute to the critic, opened a subscription to pay his share of the costs, and it was successful. W. M. Rossetti reports that Whistler then wrote to his solicitor that at least it would be equally appropriate for a band of subscribers to pay costs for him. "And," he added with one of his inimitable touches, "in the event of a subscription, I would willingly contribute my own mite." A sub-

scription was started, but it came to nothing.

Whistler gives an account of the trial in his "Gentle Art of Making Enemies," a book wherein wisdom and satire are employed to convey, in pages not one of which is dull, the principles of art as he understood and practiced them. The very title is a masterpiece : "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies" as pleasantly exemplified in many instances, wherein the serious ones of this earth, carefully exasperated, have been prettily spurred on to unseemliness and indiscretion, while overcome by an undue sense of right." Like his pictures, this title page has been imitated ; but, again, as with the pictures, the imitations are worthless save as establishing the merit of the original. "To the rare Few, who, early in Life, have rid Themselves of the Friendship of the Many, these pathetic Papers are dedicated." On the next right hand page is the line, "Messieurs les Ennemis," and Whistler's butterfly signature, rampant. Indeed, the butterfly is used throughout the book with a skill all Whistler's own, its poise and attitude adapted, in each instance, to the page or sentence with which it goes, and thus charged with significance.





¶The Turn of the Tide.

WHEN in 1884 Joseph Pennell, the etcher, first made Whistler's acquaintance, calling upon him at his studio, No. 13 Tite street, the picture again was in his possession. For after Pennell had seen the "Sarasate" and some other pictures, the painter brought out "The Falling Rocket" and asked:—

"Well now, what do you think of that? What is it?"

"Fireworks, and I suppose one of the Cremorne pictures."

"Oh you know, do you? It's the finest thing that ever was done. Critics pitch into it. But bring tots, idiots, imbeciles, blind men, children, anything but Englishmen or Ruskin here, and of course they know—even you, who stole the name—oh, shocking!—of my 'Little Venice!'"

The turn of the tide for Whistler came with the exhibition of his works which D. Croal Thomson organized at the Goupil Galleries, London, in 1892,



and where Whistler was careful to show as great a variety of his work as possible. It seemed as if he intended to make this exhibition an answer to his critics. Had they dismissed his pictures as mere sketches, here were "The Blue Wave," "Old Battersea Bridge," "The Music Room," which, now seen in the Metropolitan Museum, seem painted with almost old-fashioned care and concern. Had they objected to his negligence of details, there were the Japanese subjects, their elaboration surpassing even that of the Pre-Raphaelites, "and finished," write the Pennells, "with an exquisiteness of surface they never attempted." Had the public been told he could not draw, there were his portraits; that he had no imagination, there were the Thames paintings, "with the sordid factories and chimneys on its banks transformed into a fairyland in the night."



¶He arranged the catalogue himself. Under the titles of the pictures he printed the choicest extracts from adverse criticisms. And there was an epilogue in which he "rubbed it in" by printing the announcement, from the "Chronique des Beaux Arts,"

THE  
LOTUS

that the "Mother" had been purchased for the Luxembourg and had been received by French critics as a picture destined to rank with the work of Rembrandt, Titian and Velasquez. The old ridicule of press and review now turned to praise and, when Whistler learned that the exhibition was a success with the public as well, he remarked that the only thing needed to make the situation perfect was to send Ruskin a season ticket. Among the pictures which he sold either during the exhibition or the period immediately following it, was "The Falling Rocket." Ruskin had stigmatized the price of two hundred guineas asked for this picture by Whistler at the Grosvenor Gallery as "impudence." He sold it for eight hundred guineas and wished Ruskin might know that the purchaser had valued it at "four pots of paint."



¶ In the catalogue of this exhibition "The Falling Rocket" was No. 10 and under it he printed former strictures upon it from "Knowledge" and the "Telegraph," Ruskin's onslaught and extracts from hostile testimony at the trial.

"A dark bluish surface with dots on it, and the faintest adnumbrations of shape under the darkness, is gravely called a Nocturne in Black and Gold," reads the notice from "Knowledge." The "Telegraph's" comment had been that "his Nocturne, 'The Falling Rocket,' shows such wilful and headlong perversity that one is almost disposed to despair of an artist who, in a sane moment, could send such a daub to any exhibition." In place of any comment of his own upon these and other critical absurdities, Whistler calmly printed the paragraph from the "Chronique des Beaux Arts," which speaks of the "Mother" as a work "destined for the admiration of eternity, a work over which the consecration of the centuries will spread the patina of a Rembrandt, a Titian or a Velasquez."



The first edition of the "Gentle Art" was published in 1890. The triumph at the Goupil Gallery, where "The Falling Rocket" again was exhibited, came two years later. The tide had changed. In the catalogue he could print under the sub-head, "The Voice of a People," and bring home to the public the absurdity thereof, these words from the speech

**THE** of the Attorney General of England at the trial : "I  
**LOTUS** do not know when so much amusement has been afforded to the British public as by Mr. Whistler's pictures." And now, "Nocturne in Black and Gold—The Falling Rocket," which to Ruskin was a pot of paint flung in the public's face, has come to signify the beginning of a epoch in art.

An epoch-making picture, Messieurs les ennemis!

